



Rahul Gandhi (C), grandson of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, takes the oath after he filed his papers to contest the upcoming parliamentary elections in Sultanpur yesterday as his mother, Congress President Sonia Gandhi (L) and his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadhera look on. Rahul Gandhi, 33, filed his papers to contest the upcoming parliamentary elections as Congress Party nominee from the family borough of Amethi in northern India.

Rahul files nomination in a rain of rose petals

AFP, Amethi

Rahul Gandhi, great-grandson of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, yesterday filed his nomination to contest national polls, marking the entry of a new generation of the charismatic Gandhi dynasty into mainstream politics.

A grinning Rahul Gandhi filed his papers to contest the upcoming parliamentary elections on behalf of the dynasty's main opposition Congress party from the family borough of Amethi in northern India.

The 33-year-old financial consultant, accompanied by younger sister Priyanka, and mother Sonia Gandhi, who inherited the 119-year-old Congress following the 1991 assassination of her husband and former premier Rajiv Gandhi, drove into Amethi to cheers from thousands of followers.

al-Qaeda letter warns Spain to withdraw troops or face 'hell'

AFP, Madrid

A letter purporting to be from al-Qaeda warned Spain to withdraw its forces immediately from Iraq and Afghanistan or face "hellish" consequences, a Spanish newspaper reported yesterday.

"The Spanish state has continued its aggressions against Muslims in sending new troops to Iraq and announcing its intention to send new units to Afghanistan," the ABC newspaper quoted the Arabic language letter as saying.

It said it received the fax on Saturday signed by "Abu Dujana Al-Afgani (of the) Ansar al-Qaeda Europe group" which announced it was scrapping a "truce" designed to give Spain time to remove its forces.

"We are announcing the cancelling of the truce with effect from

midday Sunday, April 4," the statement said, calling on Spain to desist from helping "enemies of the Muslim community -- the United States and its allies."

"If these demands are not met we will declare war on you and turn your country into a hell where blood will flow in rivers. This is our last warning."

Spain's incoming Socialist prime minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero has vowed to withdraw 1,300 Iraq-based troops by June 30 unless they come under UN command.

A relief force is, however, on its way to replace the current contingent.

The outgoing conservative government of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar deployed the troops last August in the face of massive popular

disapproval.

However, since his election victory on March 14, three days after a series of train bombings killed 191 people in Madrid, Zapatero has indicated he would be willing to maintain a troop presence in Afghanistan, while sticking to his pledge to quit Iraq unless the UN takes control of operations there.

The fax described the March 11 bombings on four Madrid trains, the worst terror attacks in Europe since the 1988 bombing of a passenger jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, as "happy attacks".

The statement also claimed responsibility for a bomb discovered last Friday on a highspeed railway line between Madrid and Seville, saying it was "merely a warning" to show that "we can attack when and how we decide."

Maoists storm police post in Nepal: 9 killed

AFP, Kathmandu

Hundreds of Maoists stormed a security post in southeastern Nepal overnight killing nine policemen and wounding seven, police said yesterday, on the eve of a three-day national strike called by the rebels.

The attack on the post in Dhanusha district comes as massive anti-monarchy demonstrations have been held in Kathmandu demanding the return of democratic rule in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

Eight Maoists were killed during a three-hour gunbattle between police and the rebels, a police spokesman said, estimating that some 500 Maoists took part in the raid at Jadukhola.

Nineteen of the 35 policemen from the post were missing, the spokesman said.

The attack came ahead of a national strike called from Tuesday to Thursday by the Maoists as part of their campaign to topple the monarchy and install a communist republic in the Himalayan kingdom sandwiched between China and India.

Ministers confront Sharon over his withdrawal plan

AP, REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told opponents of his Gaza pullout proposal that they are free to leave his government, in the hottest exchange yet over his plan for a "unilateral disengagement" with the Palestinians.

The argument erupted during Sunday's weekly Cabinet meeting, according to participants. It reflected stiff opposition to the disengagement plan from within Sharon's own governing team, where his own party and two of his three coalition partners are identified with Jewish settlers - much as Sharon himself was for decades.

Israeli security forces were on high alert, preparing for the weeklong Jewish holiday of Passover, which starts Monday evening.

The military banned all Palestinians from entering Israel to try to ward off attacks. In 2002, a Palestinian suicide bomber blew up a hotel lobby during a Passover dinner, killing 29.

Sharon has proposed leaving the Gaza Strip and redeploying in the West Bank - removing troops and uprooting settlements in the process - to reduce friction between Israelis and Palestinians after more than three years of violence.

He has said he will carry out the plan next year if peace moves with the Palestinians remain stalled. In weekend interviews, Sharon said for the first time that Israel would pull out of all the settlements in Gaza, reversing an earlier indication that three settlements in northern Gaza would remain.

The pullback in the West Bank would be much more limited - only four of about 135 settlements would be removed.

Reuters adds: Israel plans to remove all its settlements in the Gaza Strip and four in the West Bank under a plan to "disengage" unilaterally from the Palestinians, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said yesterday.

"There are some details still to work out, but I believe our intention is to leave all of them," Sharon told Army Radio in reference to 21 fortified Gaza enclaves. Previously the prime minister was quoted as saying Israel would remove 17 of them.

Asked about which of the scores of settlements in the West Bank were slated for evacuation under his go-it-alone plan, Sharon said: "We are talking about four settlements in Samaria (northern West Bank), no more."

White House vetting may delay 9/11 report until after polls

AFP, Washington

The chairman of an independent commission looking into US counterterrorism activities prior to the September 11 attacks warned he could not guarantee the panel's report will be released before the November presidential election because of a protracted White House vetting process.

Former New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean said he was "surprised" by the rule but saw no way around it.

"Any time you're dealing with any kind of intelligence, even if you write a memoir after you've served in government, you've got to submit that to the same process," said the chairman, appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press" television program.

"And they go through it line by line to find out if there's anything in there which could harm American interests in the area of intelligence," he added.

According to Kean, the White House has already set up a special team led by Chief of Staff Andrew Card and made up of top US intelligence and counterterrorism officials to review the document once it comes out.

'US may need to delay Iraqi power transfer'

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration may have to consider extending its June 30 deadline for the transfer of sovereignty in Iraq or risk seeing the country lapse into civil war, the head of the US Senate's foreign relations panel said on Sunday.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar of Indiana and the panel's ranking Democrat, Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, said in separate interviews that more troops may be needed to stabilize Iraq amid growing violence including deadly clashes in a Shia section of Baghdad that killed seven US soldiers.

The lawmakers also chastised the Bush administration for failing to produce a plan to deal with a newly sovereign Iraq, and touted a Biden proposal that would give Nato a major new security role and establish a UN commissioner for Iraq who would answer to the UN Security Council.

"We're going to end up with a civil war in Iraq, if in fact we decide we can turn this over -- including the bulk of the security -- to the Iraqis," Biden told "Fox News Sunday," saying an Iraqi force would not be ready to take over security duties for at least another three years.

"Something's got to happen between now and then ... or else we're going to end up with a civil war there. We're going to end up with the

worst of all worlds," he added.

Less than three months before the scheduled handover of sovereignty by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority, Lugar told ABC's "This Week" that the Bush administration had not advised Congress on its plans for Iraq once CPA administrator Paul Bremer leaves.

The White House has not discussed likely candidates for the job of US ambassador to Iraq, who would oversee a huge Baghdad embassy staff of 3,000 people charged with assuming some of the CPA's responsibilities.

Asked whether it was time for Washington to consider extending the sovereignty deadline, Lugar said: "It may be. And I think it's probably time to have that debate."

"At this point, I would have thought there would have been a more comprehensive plan," he added. "The fact is that we don't know what we're going to do."

Lugar suggested the administration had been distracted from Iraq by Bush's decision to let his national security adviser testify before the panel investigating the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. "Our focus has been on 9/11 -- who did what, and who didn't -- but it ought to be on June 30," he said.

The Senate foreign relations panel was scheduled to examine the situation in Iraq at hearings later this month.

Suharto's party upbeat as voting ends

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesians went to the polls yesterday in an election expected to boost support for the Golkar party founded by former dictator Suharto, less than six years after he stepped down in disgrace.

The outcome of the legislative election could be crucial to President Megawati Sukarnoputri's hopes of keeping her job in the country's first direct presidential vote in July.

Opinion polls have shown Golkar likely to replace Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) as the biggest party in the 550-seat parliament, with discontent over lackluster growth, high unemployment, rising prices and corruption.

"I hope that Golkar wins the election because I hope that my younger sisters will have a better fate than mine," said garbage collector Tatan Suparna. "Despite (Golkar) once having been a party of Suharto, at least education fees and the cost of living were lower then."

More than 147 million people in the world's third largest democracy were eligible to vote. Polls closed at 1 pm (0600 GMT) and first results were expected Monday evening.

Suspected separatist rebels in Aceh province shot and injured two civilians in an attack on a polling station in Bireuen district, local police said. They said shots were fired in the air to intimidate voters elsewhere in Bireuen, a rebel stronghold.



Supporters of Philippine President Gloria Arroyo hold up portraits of her while she campaigns in her hometown of Lubao, Pampanga province yesterday. Arroyo and her number one rival for the May 10 election, local film star Fernando Poe, were locked in a tie according to the latest opinion poll published yesterday.



Sheikh Abdel al-Satar al-Bahadli, an official in radical Shia leader Moqtada al-Sadr's Army of Mehdi, brandishes a sword after taking over the governor's office in the British-controlled port city of Basra, southern Iraq yesterday. The top US official in Iraq, Paul Bremer, branded Moqtada Sadr an outlaw and warned US forces would not tolerate an uprising led by the firebrand religious leader and his followers.

Bremer brands Shia cleric an outlaw

AFP, Baghdad

US authorities in Iraq yesterday branded a radical cleric from the Shia majority an outlaw at the head of an uprising against the US-led occupation of the country.

Paul Bremer, the US civilian administrator of Iraq, pledged that US forces would stop incendiary cleric Moqtada Sadr from trying to seize authority.

"We have a group under Moqtada al-Sadr that has basically placed itself outside the legal authorities, the coalition and Iraqi officials," Bremer said.

"He is attempting to establish his authority in the place of the legitimate authority. We will not tolerate this. We will reassert the law and order which the Iraqi people expect," Bremer told a national

security meeting.

Fresh violence broke out in Baghdad, in the British-controlled southern port of Basra and in the central holy Shia city of Karbala as Sadr's Mehdi Army militia seized control of a government building and tried to capture others.

The US consulate meanwhile announced the closure of highways from Baghdad to the Jordanian capital Amman due to military activities in the area, where the restive towns of Ramadi and Fallujah are located and where residents said pre-dawn fighting caused several casualties.

US Marines later announced they had launched an offensive in Fallujah where four US contractors were killed last week and two of them savagely mutilated.

In Baghdad, fighting raged for a

second day as US troops opened fire in the squalid slum of Sadr City at stone-hurling protesters.

A young child was wounded after soldiers fired back at people pelting them with rocks, an AFP photographer witnessed.

Hundreds of angry Shias had gathered in the slum for the funeral of an Iraqi killed late Sunday during fierce clashes between coalition forces and the Mehdi Army in which 22 Iraqis and seven US soldiers were killed.

Another 85 Iraqis and 24 US troops were wounded in the running street battles.

"There is only one God. America is the enemy of Allah," the crowd chanted Monday as a coffin was carried through the squalid streets which saw their worst fighting since the capital fell to the Americans one year ago.

France detains 15 in raid over Casablanca blast

REUTERS, Paris

French police detained 15 people in a raid yesterday, including a number of people suspected of having links with suicide bomb attacks last year in Morocco, judicial sources said.

They said the 15 were seized in a Paris suburb and some were suspected of having links with Moroccan Islamic groups.

"Fifteen people have been detained," an Interior Ministry spokesman said but gave no other details.

Forty-five people were killed, including the suicide bombers, in almost simultaneous attacks in Casablanca on May 16 last year.

The judicial sources said the raid was ordered as part of an investigation into the death of a Frenchman in the suicide bombings in Casablanca.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II stands beside a Eurostar train at Waterloo International Station in London yesterday. The Queen unveiled a plaque "Entente Cordiale" on the train before boarding and embarking on a state visit to France. Eurostar is an official partner of the Entente Cordiale 100th anniversary celebrations, which marks the signing of an agreement between Britain and France in 1904, ending centuries of hostilities between the two countries.